

Ukrainian Conflict: Need to Utilise the Winter to Press for Peace

Marshal Winter seems to have taken control of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and we are witnessing a reduced tempo as far as the intensity of operations is concerned as both the adversaries seem to be in their respective corners akin to a boxing bout. There is no doubt that both sides have achieved some of their goals. But more important both need to reflect on what went wrong and what lies ahead.

Against this backdrop, the latest developments are the statements emanating regarding the possibility for negotiations. President Putin has stated that “Russia is ready to negotiate with all parties involved in the war in Ukraine but Kyiv and its Western backers have refused to engage in talks.”^[i]

On the other hand in a conversation with Prime Minister Modi, the Ukrainian President Zelenskyy had also discussed the possibility of peace talks. “I had a phone call with PM Narendra Modi and wished a successful G20 presidency,” Zelenskyy wrote on Twitter. “It was on this platform that I announced the peace formula and now I count on India’s participation in its implementation. I also thanked for humanitarian aid and support in the UN.”^[ii]

India has remained consistent in its stance for peace and an immediate end to hostilities between the two countries. India has always supported any peace efforts. Even earlier the Prime Minister had stated that; “today’s era is not of war” and India has always been vocal of ‘diplomacy and dialogue, being the path to solve this defining crisis. There is no doubt that India is in a unique position as it is a friend of both Russia and the West and could emerge as a key mediator.

The invasion of Ukraine has no doubt triggered the most deadly European conflict since World War II and the biggest confrontation between Moscow and the West since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

However what needs to be seen is the willingness from both parties to step down from their maximalist positions. These can be speculated to mean that the Ukrainians will want the Russians out of their country, to include Crimea which was annexed in 2014 and the freedom for it to choose to join NATO. Whereas Russia would want a guarantee that Ukraine does not join NATO and that the area up to the Dnieper River remains in its control and more importantly it remains the maritime power in the Black Sea controlling the ports in the region without the possibility of any NATO fleet being stationed there.

TASS agency quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying; “Our proposals for the demilitarization and denazification of the territories controlled by the regime, the elimination of threats to Russia’s security emanating from there, including our new lands, are well known to the enemy.”^[iii]

President Putin has accused the West of trying to cleave Russia apart. “Actually, the fundamental thing here is the policy of our geopolitical opponents which is aimed at pulling apart Russia, historical Russia. “I believe that we are acting in the right direction; we are defending our national interests, the interests of our citizens, our people. And we have no other choice but to protect our citizens,” Putin said.^[iv]

What is also well known is the effect of Marshal Winter on a conflict in this region. With heavy snows and sub-zero temperatures both men and material are driven to the ultimate level of endurance while operating in such a harsh environment. As regards equipment, the basic problems relate to sub optimal functioning of armaments, engines, and batteries.

Fog and blizzards create their own set of challenges for troops operating and manoeuvring in the open and at times working on the equipment due to the cold is extremely difficult. Logistics pose its own challenges, special clothing, oils and rations are also required to equip and sustain the troops. Hence, this period has traditionally been seen as a time of consolidation of gains rather than that of making any fresh moves. Historically, both Napoleon and the Germans were beaten back from Russia at the outset of winter.^[v]

Though there are reports regarding the Russians getting more conscripts and building up its arms supply for another offensive with the possibility of Belarus being used to open up another front, this seems unlikely in this weather although nothing can be ruled out in war.

Possible Scenarios

The possible scenarios regarding the outcome of the conflict can be that either Russia or Ukraine prevails or there is stalemate.

A possibility is that the Russian Army stabilises the front lines over the winter months, while building new battalions with freshly mobilised recruits. The Russian utilise this period to consolidate their gains, build up the stockpiles of ammunition, carryout replacements of their fleet and keep the pressure on by engaging Ukraine with long range vectors and the threat of escalating the conflict and then renew an offensive after the winter.

They would however need to draw lessons as to why they have struggled, need to learn what went wrong as far as their tactics, techniques and procedures are concerned and ensure remedial measures.

The second scenario is that Ukraine consolidates itself in the winter and the Western powers use this period to build up its stocks of ammunition as well as train its troops on the new equipment being supplied to them. It basically means Western countries rebuilding their defensive and offensive capabilities. Their tactics is presently focusing mainly on sabotage and subversion. Post winter once the snows melt and the terrain is no longer slushy, they renew their counter offensives concentrating on evicting the Russians from the area in the East. This picture naturally is the most encouraging for Ukraine and the West. Though there is no doubting the national resilience exhibited, the question remains Ukraine's ability to keep the initiative and sustain the momentum and the West's ability and resolve to sustain them economically.

The most probable scenario presently seems to be a stalemate which is a consolidation by both countries on the lines occupied by them. In an Indian context one could draw a parallel between the Line of Control which has remained in place for over seventy five years, physically occupied by troops and at times active in terms of firing by not only small arms but also by artillery.

The possible peace could hinge on recognition of this line by both sides. Of course it will take a heavy toll as far as deployment and sustenance of troops is concerned, and will be a stand down from the maximalist positions by both sides but it could lead to a form of 'armed peace'.

The weather enforced pause has led to General Sergei Surovikin, launching a vigorous aerial campaign that has destroyed much of Ukraine's energy infrastructure—a civilian-centered tactic.

Critical dependence of a society on crucial and well developed infrastructure and its vulnerability is what is being targeted in this phase of the war. It is no longer military infrastructure solely that is being targeted but mainly civilian infrastructure which forms the back bone of power generation.

Russian strikes on Ukrainian power stations will naturally affect the population in the winter but will also cost Ukraine; foreign investors, after all, are unlikely to return to the country when there is unreliable power. Even if the attacks do not keep out investors, they will still prove economically costly for Kyiv by stopping the Ukrainian power exports that began in July 2022.

The Russians are likely to continue to target key infrastructure with the aim of lowering the morale of the population and weakening Ukraine economically.

However, the most alarming possibility lies outside these three pictures that have been painted. That is the war is no longer limited to Ukraine and NATO gets dragged into a direct confrontation. The trigger for this could be a damaging attack on an asset on Russian soil the attributability of which can be traced back to NATO.

While winter does provide a respite from physical engagement, the challenge lies in using this period to arrive at an acceptable solution to the conflict. Negotiations would perforce need to cover the entire spectrum of cessation of hostilities; disengagement, de-escalation and de-induction. While this may seem unlikely as both sides have demonstrated a resilience in continuing with the conflict as is being manifested in their rhetoric and defining 'status quo ante bellum' is difficult, but the same is imperative. Renewing the tempo of operations after resting, retraining, refitting, replenishing, rebuilding and reconstituting of forces is not a welcome trajectory.

Endnotes

[i] Guy Faulconbridge, Putin says Russia ready to negotiate over Ukraine, Kyiv says Moscow doesn't want talks, The Reuters, 26 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-ready-negotiate-over-ukraine-2022-12-25/>

[ii] Ukraine's Zelenskyy seeks India's help with 'peace formula,' Al Jazeera, 26 Dec 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/26/ukraines-zelenskyy-seeks-indias-help-with-peace-formula>

[iii] Ronald Popeski and Lidia Kelly, Ukraine's Zelenskyy seeks India's help with 'peace formula', The Reuters, 26 December 2022 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/26/ukraines-zelenskyy-seeks-indias-help-with-peace-formula>

[iv] Guy Faulconbridge, Putin says Russia ready to negotiate over Ukraine, Kyiv says Moscow doesn't want talks, The Reuters, 26 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-ready-negotiate-over-ukraine-2022-12-25/>

[v] Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh, Winter and war: Will Russia continue to target economic assets to weaken Ukrainian morale?, The Firstpost, 27 December

2022 <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/winter-and-war-will-russia-continue-to-target-economic-assets-to-weaken-ukrainian-morale-11882941.html>

Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

Article uploaded on 06-01-2023

Disclaimer : The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.